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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5601
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0109
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4434
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3693
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7207
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4785
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1014
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 1013
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0804
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000060

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA'S LEADER KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

REF: A. RANGOON 22

[1](#)B. RANGOON 7

[1](#)C. SINGAPORE 70

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Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Senior General Than Shwe returned to Burma on January 12 from his hospital stay in Singapore. He appeared briefly in the Burmese media on January 15 and 16, chairing the quarterly SPDC meeting in Nay Pyi Taw and welcoming PM Soe Win back from the ASEAN Summit in Cebu. Although rumors of his death were premature, rumors abound in Burma that he faces life-threatening health problems. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) After missing Burmese Independence Day to make an unannounced trip to Singapore on December 31 (ref B) for what the Burmese Embassy in Singapore described as a "routine medical check up," Senior General Than Shwe returned to Burma on January 12. He traveled back to Burma via the chartered plane used to transport Prime Minister Soe Win to see him in Singapore en route to the ASEAN meeting and East Asian Summit in the Philippines.

[1](#)3. (C) The SPDC held its regular quarterly meeting, postponed from January 8, on January 15 in Nay Pyi Taw. Regime-run television briefly showed Than Shwe chairing the meeting on its January 15 evening news, although it is highly unusual for the regime to publicize or televise its quarterly SPDC meetings while in session. The SPDC officials seen on television appeared unusually tense. The January 16 evening news also featured Than Shwe, welcoming Soe Win back from the ASEAN meeting. The extra media coverage may be designed to dispel rumors that Than Shwe had died or was seriously incapacitated and to convince military rank-and-file that he was still fit to lead. Embassy sources also reported rumors that Than Shwe would not participate in the quarterly meetings until their conclusion, but instead would go to a beach resort this week to recuperate.

¶4. (C) Multiple Embassy sources report increased security around the country during Than Shwe's absence abroad. Local media sources observed that, during Than Shwe's absence, the regime mouthpiece daily, "The New Light of Myanmar," carried fewer reports than usual about SPDC and cabinet members' travels around the country as key leaders kept a low profile. Embassy personnel also observed increased police checkpoints around Rangoon at night.

¶5. (C) The Rangoon-based correspondent for AFP (PROTECT) told us that Than Shwe's health remains precarious due to congestive heart failure, and reported that his doctors urged him to remain in Singapore to rest. Than Shwe was, she said, afraid to be away too long, lest his rivals seize the opportunity to oust him. She corroborated earlier information (ref B) that Than Shwe knows his health is failing and wants Vice Senior General Maung Aye to retire together with him, but that Maung Aye will not agree. Than Shwe reportedly fears Maung Aye would purge the military of Than Shwe's cronies and place Than Shwe and family under house arrest, as Than Shwe did to former dictator Ne Win's family. The AFP correspondent believes if Than Shwe does not retire at this current SPDC meeting, he may be kept on as titular head of state but would no longer play an active role in day-to-day affairs.

¶6. (C) Emboff heard a separate rumor from Dr. Thaung Han (PROTECT), a Rangoon-based doctor turned businessman. He claimed that doctors in Singapore discovered that Than Shwe was riddled with abdominal cancer and was beyond effective treatment.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: It is clear that a serious health problem prompted Than Shwe's unexpected hospital visit, but no one

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can confirm whether he suffers from "nothing serious," congestive heart failure, a stroke, or advanced cancer. Everyone will be watching his appearances more closely to gauge the state of his health in the expectation that a change of rulers approaches. END COMMENT.
VILLAROSA